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FREDRIC JAMESON: THE UTOPIC/DYSTOPIC IMAGINATION

NECROPOLITICS DYSTOPIA, MEGAPOLIS, SUBURBS, SUPERRICH, UTOPIA

A true opposite of utopia would be a society that is either completely unplanned or is planned to be deliberately terrifying and awful. Dystopia, typically invoked, is neither of these things; rather, it is a utopia that has gone wrong, or a utopia that functions only for a particular segment of society.¹

Fredric Jameson in a provocative essay *Utopia as Method, or the Uses of the Future* asks us

“How can a place be a method?” Most of the time we think of utopia as a place, or a separate non-place in the sense of a secondary world with its own sociocultural milieu. But what if such a place that is no-place formed the dialectical union of opposites we call utopia/dystopia? What if this non-place were the outcome of the failure of the myth of progress? With the failure of modernity and its supposed utopic teleology and the myth of progress we are now within such a non-place, a place between times, a moment of pure difference in which neither the positive nor negative forces hold sway, but the balance between the forces of life and the forces of death vie for our future. As Jameson notes:

As far as space is concerned, the rich are withdrawing ever more urgently into their gated communities and their fortified enclosures; the middle classes are tirelessly engaged in covering the last vestiges of nature with acres of identical development homes; and the poor, pouring in from the former countryside, swell the makeshift outskirts with a population explosion so irrepressible that in a few years none of the ten largest cities on the globe will include the familiar first-world metropolises any longer. (ibid.)

Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums* situates the utopic/dystopic conclaves within the superstructure of our Megalopolises. He offers us an advanced state of the late-capitalist hyperworld in 3-D vision, where slums like slime molds infiltrate the fabric of our very lives, and even the elite live lives like truant children who have just escaped from the hinterlands of some Lovecraftian nightmare zone leaving the rest of us to cannibal horrors unimagined by science-fiction or gothic troubadours. The cities of the future, rather than being made out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks, and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring toward heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay. Indeed, the one billion city-dwellers who inhabit postmodern slums might well look back with envy at the ruins of the sturdy mud homes of Catal Hayuk in Anatolia, erected at the very dawn of city life nine thousand years ago.²



As Jameson would have it today— ecological catastrophe, worldwide poverty and famine, structural unemployment on a global scale, and the seemingly uncontrollable traffic in armaments of all kinds, including smart bombs and unmanned drones (in armaments, progress does apparently still exist!) — leaving pandemics, police states, race wars, and drugs out of the picture, for us to realize that in each of these areas no serious counterforce exists anywhere in

the world, and certainly not in the United States, which is the cause of most of them.(ibid.)

Under these circumstances, the last gasp of a properly utopian vision, the last attempt at a utopian forecast of the future transfigured, was a rather perverse one: so-called free-market fundamentalism as it seized the moment of globalization to predict the rising of all boats and the wonder-working miraculous powers of worldwide unregulated global markets. (Jameson, 22)

Jameson portrays utopian imaginings as a failure beyond which we cannot go. This utopian imagination is not a representation but an operation calculated to disclose the limits of our own imagination of the future, the lines beyond which we do not seem able to go in imagining changes in our own society and world (except in the direction of dystopia and catastrophe) (23). In our time the commodification of utopian desire has far outstripped our ability to envision either dystopic critiques of the present or utopic dreams of the future, we live in the utopic impulse and a compulsive need to travel beyond the present moment toward ever and ever greater semblances rather than representations.

The utopian program, which aims at the realization of a utopia, can be as modest or as ambitious as one wants; it can range from a whole social revolution, on a national or even world scale, all the way down to the design of the uniquely utopian space of a building or garden. What all these have in common, however— besides the utopian transformation of reality— is that closure or enclave structure that all utopias seemingly must confront in one way or another. These utopian spaces are thus totalities, whatever their scale; they are symbolic of a world transformed, and as such they must posit limits, boundaries between the utopian and the nonutopian. It is with these limits and with this enclave structure that any serious critique of utopia will begin (25).



The utopian method that Jameson hopes to instigate is an inversion of both the genealogical method of Nietzsche and Foucault. "Genealogy, in other words, was meant to lay in place the various logical preconditions for the appearance of a given phenomenon, without in any way implying that they constituted the latter's causes, let alone the latter's antecedents or early stages" (42). As he states it:

So far, there is no term as useful for the construction of the future as genealogy for such a construction of the past; it is certainly not to be called futurology, and utopology will never mean much, I fear. The operation itself, however, consists in a prodigious effort to change the valences on phenomena that so far exist only in our own present and experimentally to declare

positive things that are clearly negative in our own world, to affirm that dystopia is in reality utopia if examined more closely, to isolate specific features in our empirical present so as to read them as components of a different system. This is what we have seen Virno do when he borrowed an enumeration of what in Heidegger are clearly meant to be negative and highly critical features of modern society or modern actuality, staging each of these alleged symptoms of degradation as an occasion for celebration and as a promise of what he does not – but what we may– call an alternate utopian future. (42)

This kind of prospective hermeneutic is a political act only in one specific sense: as a contribution to the reawakening of the imagination of possible and alternate futures, a reawakening of that historicity which our system –offering itself as the very end of history– necessarily represses and paralyzes. This is the sense in which utopology revives long-dormant parts of the mind, unused organs of political, historical, and social imagination that have virtually atrophied for lack of use, muscles of praxis we have long since ceased exercising, revolutionary gestures we have lost the habit of performing, even subliminally. Such a revival of futurity and of the positing of alternate futures is not a political program or even a political practice, but it is hard to see how any durable or effective political action could come into being without it. (42-43)

Such questions will inhabit this type of hermeneutic: “Toward what kind of future are we being led by savage, fanatical capitalism?” Or, to frame the same question in a different way, “What do contemporary ‘dreamworlds’ of consumption, property, and power tell us about the fate of human solidarity?” The spatial logic of neoliberalism revives the most extreme colonial patterns of residential segregation and zoned consumption. Everywhere, the rich and near rich are retreating into sumptuary compounds, leisure cities, and gated replicas of imaginary California suburbs.

This unprecedented spatial and moral secession of the wealthy from the rest of humanity also expresses itself in current fads for high-end monasticism (Sara Lipton), floating city-states (China Miéville), space tourism, private islands, restored monarchies, and techo-murder at a distance (Dan Monk). The super-rich can also retreat, self-deified but not yet dead, into their marble mausoleums (see Joe Day on personal museums), or buy up to 2 million acres of ranchland and singlehandedly “save Nature” (see Jon Wiener on Ted Turner’s bison). Where the rich lack requisite power and numbers to create new luxury cities (as at Arg-e Jadid in Iran) or gentrify wholesale old capitals (like London or Paris), they can nonetheless “disembed” themselves from the matrix of popular urban life through the creation of separate transportation and security systems (as in Managua, discussed by Dennis Rodgers) or by the radical disfranchisement of poor people’s right to unconditional use of public streets (as in the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in the case of Hicks, described by Don Mitchell). In post-Taliban Kabul (described by Anthony Fontenot and Ajmal Maiwand), they simply evict the poor to build their palaces: an exhibitionist narco-warlord architecture that quotes both Walt Disney and Genghis Khan.³

The superrich live in uptopic conclaves that leave the rest of us wandering the hells of forgotten thoughts. The neo-liberal pursuit of riches is nothing less than a utopian frenzy, and the early

twenty-first century, with its global vogue for evil paradises (of which Dubai may be both the most remarkable and sinister) recapitulates many of the same mythic, impossible longings that Walter Benjamin discovered in his famous excavation of Baudelaire's Paris. With Marx's theory of commodity fetishism as his Rosetta stone, Benjamin unraveled the mystery of the bewitched capitalist city where human collectivity, overwhelmed by its own colossal productive powers, hallucinates its social being as a swirling "dream-life of objects." But the inverted realities and false consciousness of the Victorian era have now grown to Himalayan, life-threatening proportions. If the iron-and-glass arcades of the 1850s were the enchanted forests of early consumer capitalism, today's luxury-themed environments—including city-sized supermalls, artificial island suburbs, and faux downtown "lifestyle centers"—function as alternative universes for privileged forms of human life. On a planet where more than 2 billion people subsist on two dollars or less a day, these dreamworlds enflame desires—for infinite consumption, total social exclusion and physical security, and architectural monumentality—that are clearly incompatible with the ecological and moral survival of humanity. (Davis, *Dreamworlds*)



The need for an alternative counter to the neo-liberal fantasias and evil paradises is the ultimate political act:

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1. Gordin, Michael D.; Gyan Prakash; Helen Tilley (2010-08-23). *Utopia/Dystopia: Conditions of Historical Possibility*. Princeton University Press.
2. Davis, Mike (2007-09-17). *Planet of Slums*. Norton.
3. Davis, Mike; Monk, Daniel Bertrand (2011-07-16). *Evil Paradises: Dreamworlds of Neoliberalism* (Kindle Locations 209-217). Perseus Books Group.

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